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SUBJECT: Can Pollution Harm an Unborn Child? Despite
Uncertain Science, Anecdotal Stories Fuel Local Concerns

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Ref: 05 Guangzhou 30589

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The following cable describes the perception and the basis for the perception many residents in South China have that the pollution in the region is harming unborn babies; it does not address the hard science related to this issue. Recent press reports and anecdotal accounts have led many local residents to believe there is a possible association between pollution and pregnancy-related complications, especially birth defects -- a hot potato issue given that the one-child policy has made parents extremely anxious about the health of their only child. While direct evidence linking pollution to pregnancy complications is limited, and most officials refuse to discuss the issue, one local professor who specializes in genetics and hereditary diseases speculated that pollution may be causing a rise in birth defects. Some local media sources also claim that China has a relatively high frequency of birth defects, at about 4-6% of China's newborn population; although official Chinese figures show a lower rate of incidence.

¶2. (SBU) While government officials now call for a greater focus on sustainable development and cleaning up environmental problems, corruption, mismanagement, and lack of funding and accountability promise to slow progress. However, as top leaders, such as President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, take an interest in the environment, and as the Chinese people become ever more sensitive to the possible harmful effects of pollution, pressure to address the problem will grow. Post will provide a closer look at the current environmental situation in South China septel.

END SUMMARY.

Link Between Pollution and Pregnancy-Related Complications?

¶3. (SBU) Over the past year, several stories in the local press have suggested a link between pollution and pregnancy-related complications, including birth defects and infertility. Furthermore, Post is aware of a number of anecdotal cases where pregnant women in Guangzhou experienced "difficult pregnancies", i.e., ones in which the mother experienced unusual complications requiring extra medical care and prolonged periods of bed rest to prevent a miscarriage. Several doctors in Guangzhou commented that air pollution -- as well as other environmental factors such as toxins in food and the so-called "electrical smog" found in office environments -- was making bed rest pregnancies increasingly common. A Hong Kong obstetrician consulted regarding one of these cases agreed that the phenomenon of pregnancies requiring long-term bed rest due to pollution was quite common in major Chinese cities.

Is My Baby Going to Be Healthy?

¶4. (SBU) In a society where a couple is generally limited to having only one healthy child, the concerns about delivering a healthy baby the first time around are understandably high. Given this concern and the fact that air pollution -- which is literally visible on many days -- is being linked to health problems in local press reports and "through the grapevine" accounts, Econoff endeavored to learn more about the perceived effects of environmental pollution on the health of a pregnant woman and her baby. Post will provide a closer look at the current environmental situation in South China septel.

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The Sound of Silence

¶5. (SBU) Attempts to discuss this issue with local health experts proved extremely difficult. Post's official requests for appointments at Sun Yat Sen University, the Guangzhou Number Two People's Hospital (the city's best obstetric hospital by most accounts), and the Guangdong Health Department were all denied. In his explanation as to why the Chinese were denying our meeting requests, Feng Shaomin, the head of the Foreign Affairs Division of the Guangdong Health Department, said Health Department leaders held several meetings to discuss our request, finally deciding that birth defects was "too sensitive" a topic. Feng admitted that if the Health Department were to release "unaudited" information, Health Department leaders would "have to bear responsibility."

¶6. (SBU) Econoff was able, however, to discuss the topic with two experts -- Professor Liang Zhicheng (strictly protect), a retired professor of biology at Jinan University who specializes in genetics and hereditary diseases, and Dr. Yang Dongzi (strictly protect), chief of obstetrics and gynecology (OB/GYN) at the Second Affiliated Hospital of Sun Yat Sen University and president of the Guangdong Provincial Association of OB/GYNs. Dr. Yang confided to Econoff that the Chinese government, in her view, does "not encourage" information about the relationship between pollution and birth defects to be made available, even to local researchers, and that even she had difficulty finding information on the subject.

Pollution and Birth Defects--It's Not Just the Air

¶7. (SBU) Liang noted that air, water, and soil pollution may all increase a woman's risk for having a baby with a birth

defect, although he did not elaborate. Water resources are also often contaminated; reports indicate that most urban ground water is polluted, and most urban and rural water supplies are not potable. But other factors also raise the probability of birth defects. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (HHS/CDC) birth defects Project Director told Econoff that air pollution and other environmental toxins have been reported to be associated with an increased risk for birth defects and other pregnancy-related complications.

Improved Awareness of Prenatal Health Requirements

18. (SBU) Dr. Yang noted that the women she sees in Guangzhou are using their growing knowledge of prenatal health to proactively prevent birth defects by accessing the relatively good prenatal care available in the city. Nonetheless, Yang stressed that during the first trimester of pregnancy -- when the fetus is developing its internal organs and at greatest risk of harm -- many women may not yet realize they are pregnant, and thus may not take care to avoid harmful pollutants.

Testing for Birth Defects Not Popular in Guangzhou

19. (SBU) Dr. Yang said that despite women's growing understanding of the need for good prenatal care, many of her patients remain reluctant to undergo invasive testing for birth defects because of the risk of miscarriage the tests carry. She said because of China's one-child policy, mothers don't want to submit their only offspring to a test that could harm the child.

The Numbers Vary, But Birth Defects Appear to be Rising

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110. (SBU) Reports on the number of birth defects in China vary widely depending on the source. Guangdong's Southern Metropolis Daily, citing a 1996-2004 report by "the China monitoring system for birth defects" reported in September 2005 that China has a relatively high frequency of birth defects, with 800,000 to 1.2 million babies with birth defects born each year, or 4-6% of China's newborn population; Professor Liang agrees with this estimate. This percentage is double the figure of 2-3% percent seen in many countries. (Note: The U.S. CDC estimates that roughly 3% of babies born in the U.S. have birth defects. End note.)

111. (SBU) The Chinese Ministry of Health (MOH), however, cites lower numbers. The Hong Kong press reported that MOH figures show a 1.05% rate of birth defects in 2001; 1.11% in 2002, and 1.29% in 2003. (Note: Econoffs were unable to independently verify the MOH statistics because the MOH official public website does not include these statistics. As a result, we were also unable to clarify what types of defects were included in the statistics. End Note.) A website affiliated with the People's Daily reported that the birth defect rate was 1.28% in 2004. The most recent statistics available show that Guangdong's birth defect rate in 2002 was 1.37%, and 2.12% in 2004, according to the China Population and Development Research Center. Birth defects surveillance in most developing countries is incomplete at best, according to the HHS/CDC birth defects expert, and many severe cases are likely to die early without a diagnosis, thus they may never be reported.

And Infertility is Rising Too

112. (SBU) According to the Hong Kong press, during the past two decades, the infertility rate in China has climbed from 3% -- among the lowest in the world -- to 12.5%, coming

closer to the 15-20% range in developed countries. (Note: While the article did not specify its definition of infertility, a common definition is one year or more of involuntary childlessness. End Note.) The director of infertility services at a Beijing hospital was quoted in the report as blaming "environmental factors" for the spike, although he did not elaborate. Meanwhile, Dr. Yang suggested changing lifestyles may also be to blame. She said that Chinese women are increasingly engaging in premarital sex, which may lead to sexually transmitted diseases that can cause fertility problems later (see reftel). Meanwhile, more premarital sex has led to an increase in unplanned pregnancies, which in turn leads many young women to seek abortions, which can lead to complications affecting the recipient's reproductive health. Finally, Yang commented that many professional Chinese women are waiting until they are in their 30s to have a baby, when it becomes more difficult to conceive and to sustain a pregnancy. (Note: For many years the vast majority of Chinese married at exactly age 20, the then legal marriage age, and conceived immediately thereafter. As a result, women avoided getting pregnant too young, as is a problem in many developing countries, and actually attempted to have children at exactly their most fertile age. Changing lifestyles have led to later marriages, when the infertility rate is higher. End note.)

Rural Women: Slightly Higher Rates of Birth Defects

¶13. (SBU) A website affiliated with the People's Daily reported a rate 1.27% birth defects in urban areas, and 1.33% in rural areas. Dr. Yang also commented that, in her experience, birth defects are higher in the countryside than in the city. Dr. Yang explained that rural women may come

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into direct contact with polluting chemicals such as pesticides. Moreover, prenatal care and maternal nutrition in the countryside is inferior to that in the cities.

Concern That Pollution May Impact Pregnancies

¶14. (SBU) Wang Bin, director of the women's health division at the MOH, said publicly in early 2005 that the increase in children in China diagnosed at birth with health problems is due to environmental pollution. Wang acknowledged that improved diagnostic standards have enabled better detection of health problems. Liang Zhicheng also publicly attributed the rise in birth defects to pollution in a Hong Kong press report. Regardless of the scientific connection, or lack thereof, or of other factors such as poor prenatal medical care, genetics, bad prenatal health decisions by the mother, stress, etc., there is growing public concern in South China that high levels of air, water, and other environmental pollution may be contributing to a number of reproductive health problems.

Comment

¶15. (SBU) Environmental issues are of growing concern to both the Chinese public and the national government. Child health is also a critical issue to the public. It is therefore unsurprising that public attention would focus on the potential impact of environmental pollutants on child and maternal health, rather than on the more fully documented environmental links to adult heart, respiratory and other illnesses. The rumors circulating in Guangdong provide an interesting window into how China's family planning policy and the importance of healthy children affects the public.

¶16. (SBU) What is clear is that more data on birth defects and maternal and child health in general as well as on

environmental health are needed. China simply does not yet produce the quality of data needed to look at how specific environmental contaminants affect specific health issues, and this leaves the public confused and worried.

¶17. (SBU) HHS/CDC has a long-standing birth defects study that to date has focused on improved maternal nutrition - a key intervention in reducing the incidence of birth defects. It is our understanding that this study may now address some environmental questions. These studies should prove invaluable in shedding light in an area which thus far has been the purview of rumor and anecdote.

¶18. (SBU) This cable has been cleared by Beijing Embassy ESTH.

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